

Looking beyond the Greek city

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The study of landscapes is an important part of how we understand the world around us. Dan Stewart argues here that Greek landscape archaeology provides a unique means of studying the countryside – the primary setting for most people’s lives in the past – through the lens of economy, religion, and political interaction.

The ways in which our surroundings affect our lives are something we often take for granted; similarly, the ways in which we shape our surroundings are something that has only recently been discussed in a meaningful way. In recent years, the media have focused on global warming, rising sea levels, desertification, and pollution. British society is largely urban, with most people living in cities or large towns, but much of the world is primarily rural – and it is these rural areas, upon which most people depend for their livelihoods, which are most drastically affected by environmental change.

The Greek world was in many respects not so different. It was a rural society, with most people eking a living out of their surroundings. And just like the modern world, shifts in environment and politics could radically reshape that rural landscape. The historian Polybius, writing in the mid 2nd century B.C., claimed that

in our time the whole of Greece has been subject to a low birth rate and a general decrease of the population, owing to which cities have become deserted and the land has ceased to yield fruit, although there have neither been continuous wars nor epidemics.

Polybius 36.17.5–6

Until recently the words of Polybius gave us the fullest picture we could have of the Greek landscape in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods. Not that he was

alone in his estimation of a barren countryside; countless ancient authors took up the idea of ‘decline and depopulation’ of Greece in order to explain the area’s contemporary political and cultural position. For many ancient authors, and for many modern historians, the question was not whether Polybius was accurate in his portrayal of the countryside, the question was how had Greece fallen so far from the heights of Periclean Athens? Scholarship and literature on the countryside became a lament for the past glories of Greece. You could almost hear the wind whistling through the ivy-covered ruins of the past architectural wonders of Greek temples and neglected altars, while all around was a bleak landscape of dust furrows and desiccated trees.

This is a powerful image, but its accuracy is far from certain. Our ancient texts were almost all written by elite land-owning men who spent much of their time in cities. Their experience of the countryside may have been nothing more than something to pass through on a journey from A to B (as in the ancient travel-writer Pausanias), or as the manicured backdrop to their rural estates (as represented in wall-painting, perhaps). Their understanding of the landscape was one conditioned by their social status. It is important to remember that they represented the minority of the population – so how can we gain an understanding of this rural countryside, the lives of all of the people who depended upon it, and gain a broader appreciation of the contexts which produced authors like Polybius? One of the best tools is landscape archaeology.

What is landscape archaeology? and what is it good for?

Landscape archaeology emerged as a distinct type of archaeological study relatively recently, largely since the 1970s. Whereas ‘regular’ archaeology is often characterized by quite focused excavation of specific areas, frequently within cities, landscape archaeology is concerned more with the long-term sweeping changes and continuities in the vast tracts of land that surround cities, villages, and settlements.

It is a more broad-brush approach. It cobbles together a variety of archaeological techniques in order to build an understanding of what was happening over time, rather than a precise understanding of events at a specific time. If excavation is seen as an in-depth study of a character in a novel, landscape archaeology is the plot summary and description of the setting in which characters interact (and which helps shape that interaction).

Excavation plays a part, of course, but the primary tools are field surveys and environmental studies. But Greek landscape archaeologists also have to make sense of inscriptions, and a wide variety of ancient literary sources, and negotiate the modern political climate in order to study the arena for most ancient human activity: the countryside.

Much of the rural landscape of Greece – indeed of most places in Europe – is littered with evidence of past activity. There are often hundreds of broken, weathered pieces of pottery, roof tiles, terracotta lamps, and the other detritus of ancient life simply lying on the surface of the ground. This material often lies in close proximity to where it originally fell; by plotting both the amount and the density of this carpet of material across a landscape, we can build a picture of long-term activity. Frequently, these artefact scatters form distinct ‘puddles’ of material, with thousands of artefacts located within a landscape whose immediate surroundings show only tens or hundreds of artefacts.

In short, it becomes possible to read the landscape as a canvas of past activity, utilizing the material and environmental clues that have built up over time. Larger pockets of material suggest an increased focus for activity – small farms, olive oil processing sites, or small religious sanctuaries. Those areas with less material may be the actual fields and vine rows where crops were grown, the pasturage for the sheep and goats, the hills over which armies marched.

One of the questions that landscape archaeology is especially good at examining is the changing economic role of the rural countryside. Polybius and his successors often tell us of the changing

nature of the rural Greek countryside – fewer people and larger estates, essentially – that led to Greece’s long-term economic stagnation.

Simply put, the Polybian version and the picture formed from an assessment of the artefacts do not always agree. While some areas of Greece do show a general decline in the number of small sites, which could be interpreted as localized economic problems and depopulation, other areas do not conform to this trend at all. Instead of a consistent, unified picture of the economy of Greece at this time, the one that emerges from the archaeology is disjointed and highly variable. It is a highly regionalized landscape, showing broad differences. Just as Cornwall and Yorkshire are different landscapes, both physically and economically, Arcadia and the Argolid show noticeably different developments over time. Polybius, while providing a useful general narrative, minimizes these differences to create a general impression. Landscape archaeology allows us to emphasize the differences to create a more nuanced understanding.

Beyond economy

The economic life of the inhabitants of the rural countryside was only one aspect of how these people lived. Landscape archaeology can also provide some insight into changing religious ideas. Religion is often presented as a conservative social institution: resistant to change and built upon long-standing time-tested traditions. But religion in the Greek world was far more complicated than this, and religious ideas and traditions could be used to justify new political attitudes, changing socio-economic situations, or reinforce community identity.

It is possible to identify many small rural sanctuaries in the countryside of Greece. Indeed, much of the space of Greece was ‘mapped out’ with sacred associations – there was no neat division between ‘church’ and ‘state’. Most activities held a sacred component, be it sowing, harvesting, receiving guests, politics, or even simply travelling. The rural landscape was no different and many areas show evidence of past cultic activity. The intensity and duration of this activity can be studied, and some interesting associations emerge: especially in terms of how communities deal with each other and define themselves.

The Menelaion at Sparta (above) was always an important community shrine situated on the hills above the ancient city. It was the supposed burial place and centre of worship of that Homeric Spartan king who lost his wife to the Trojan Paris. The worship of Menelaus was part of what it meant to be a Spartan. Interestingly, however, the intensity and nature of the

worship changed over time. It is possible to pinpoint periods of increased dedication at the sanctuary, and grippingly, these correspond to periods of particular crisis to the Spartan city. Other, less well-documented shrines also show related intensifications of activities at similar times. In other words, an increase in activity at a uniquely Spartan shrine helps reinforce what it meant to be Spartan at those times when the community was in crisis.

It is possible to see similar peaks and troughs of activity in other rural sanctuaries as well; those located at the borders of the territory between communities were often used to support contested territorial claims. With land being a valuable commodity in the ancient world, it was important not just to use a piece of land, but also to show a justification for your occupation of it. If your neighbour also has a claim, what better way to claim primacy than to point at the rural shrine on a hill – where you worship, where your father worshipped, where your father’s father worshipped – as a visible marker of your legitimacy?

Rome: the cloud in the West

It is not just in small local communities, the religious arena, or long-term economics that landscape archaeology can help in our understanding of the past. It is invaluable for helping us understand the impact of the coming of Rome on the landscapes and communities of Greece, in both obvious and subtle ways.

When Lucius Mummius and his legions marched into the Peloponnese, they left behind them a vastly altered landscape. One of the most visible signs of their presence was the destruction of the city of Corinth in 146 B.C., a palpable example to the rest of Greece of just who was in charge. Literary sources suggest that Corinth lay abandoned until around 44 B.C., when Julius Caesar planted a veteran colony on the site.

Landscape archaeology has shown that there was indeed a massive shift in population and habitation at Corinth around the middle of the second century. However, landscape archaeology has also shown that while the Romans heavily impacted the countryside around Corinth, it was far from deserted. It still shows extensive signs of occupation and habitation. Most interestingly, rural shrines continue to be used after the Mummian destruction and after Caesar’s foundation: the city may have been radically altered, but the countryside of Corinth was still inhabited – most likely by many of the same people.

So why do anything else?

Landscape archaeology is not without its limitations. It is not good at pinpointing

specific dates, or in dealing with individual events or people. Also, much of the countryside has no written historical record, leaving the material open to a variety of readings. It is best to see it not as a stand-alone method of study, but as another of the tools available to us in our examination of the past. Saying it is a ‘broad-brush’ method implies that we must also use other ‘brushes’. Only through using the largest variety of tools can we gain the broadest understanding of life in the past – and, ultimately, appreciate contemporary challenges to society.

Dan Stewart's research is on the landscape of the Peloponnese in the Hellenistic and Roman periods – rather different from the landscape of his native Canada.